

RESENTMENT OF THE AMERICAN PRESENCE AS A TIME LIMIT
ON OUR EFFORTS IN VIETNAM

Where the American buildup has taken place it has created severe social frictions between Americans and the Vietnamese population. It has also brought about what the Vietnamese consider to be a deterioration of social values. These consequences of the US presence trouble all segments of politically relevant Vietnamese, and strain their support for and tolerance of the war effort. In the future, these consequences may be a decisive factor in how long, in light of domestic political factors in Vietnam, we can remain there.

The increasingly strained relations between Americans and Vietnamese in urban areas are a result of many factors, of which the major ones are the economic effects of the US buildup, and the behavior of and impression created by large numbers of Americans concentrated in urban areas of the country. The more classical tragedies of war - deaths, including those caused by US mistakes - are of lessor everyday concern to the city Vietnamese.

The economic effects have been studied exhaustively, and need no comment. The behavioral aspects defy quantitative or objective study, but can be appreciated through observation and through the comments, printed or private, of any parts of the Vietnamese political spectrum. They are probably emotionally least offensive to the lower urban economic strata. They are offensive through though remunerative to many merchants, and to the Chinese community. They are highly offensive to virtually all politically conscious Vietnamese in affected areas, right and left in the political spectrum.

The behavioral aspects of the buildup, briefly, are that an unprecedented number of richer, physically larger, and racially different foreigners visually and economically dominate the areas where they are concentrated; and, from the Vietnamese viewpoint, take over the choice features of these areas, including

housing, shops, restaurants, recreational facilities, and women. The "take-over" (again from the Vietnamese viewpoint) is often accompanied by an attitude of toughness and superiority.

The social takeover by Americans, and the inflation, have been paralleled by what many Vietnamese consider to be a deterioration of the country's social fabric. Economic opportunism, corruption, and unrespectable types of services have greatly increased. A characteristic case, in some degree reflective of every town where there has been a US buildup, is that of the President of the Binh Dinh Provincial Council, elected in mid-1964. This conservative and quiet civil servant converted his house on Qui Nhon's main street into a massage house for Americans, featuring special services performed by teenage girls under the non-participating supervision of his daughter. The establishment ironically was in due course declared off-limits by American military police due to a high VD incidence, whereupon the owner protested officially to the provincial government, as well as by letter to the American Embassy.

The result of these types of pressure - the American takeover, the deterioration of social values, the inflation - has been a growing resentment of Americans and a tendency to blame all evils on them. This resentment is rife among those who have responded sympathetically to Buddhist-led demonstrations of 1964 - 1966. It is also present among the Catholics, although often in a more rationalized manner. It is the rule among students of all backgrounds, including those in a number of major cities in the Delta. (The Delta has to date escaped the consequences of the buildup and its main power group, the Hoa Hao, is an exception to the pattern of resentment).

It is the rule among VN military personnel - officers, who are professionally threatened, and soldiers, who are economically squeezed and stripped of their attractive camp women. It is present among civil servants, including those in policy-making posts. It is by now the dominant feature of American relations with Vietnamese on the personal level, and too often on the professional civilian or military level. These relations are now far more sour and strained than before.

The Spring demonstrations of 1966 which, overall, lacked popular support, contained anti-American themes which, at the inception, struck sympathetic chords among large numbers of Vietnamese. These demonstrations - including the anti-American themes - were discredited by the overall chaos that resulted, and the fear of the chaos that most of the urban population felt. The anti-Americanism, nonetheless, was surfaced and has remained an always slightly-opened Pandora's box.

Resentment of the American presence is held in check primarily by one factor: the fear of a Communist takeover of the country that is shared by most of the politically relevant Vietnamese in urban areas. (Politically relevant refers to groups that possess an organizational skeleton, and whose opposition to the continuation of the war can be decisive. The Viet Cong part of this spectrum is marginal in most urban areas; in rural areas, given the present balance of forces, it cannot politically stop the war effort).

As the resentment, social frictions and deterioration, and economic pressures - in a word, war weariness - grow, they may, within the next two or three years, subjectively overbalance the fear of a Communist takeover. This process may involve some form of psychological repression of fear of the

Communists, or an unconscious emotional equation to the effect that it is not worth enduring the pressures of the present in an attempt, never certain, to avoid a major future evil. The process will occur at different times with different parts of the political spectrum. If it occurs in sufficient degree among sufficient groups, it will seize on the many opportunities afforded each year for mass display of emotion and will produce in its most simple external aspects, a continuing set of demonstrations of an ugly and anti-American character that will make our presence in Vietnam politically untenable.

Resentment of American presence and general war weariness offer the Communists several opportunities to offset their major liability, the fear of them that prevails among the non-Communist spectrum - and to hasten the day when the pressures of the war overbalance this fear. One possible Communist reaction (directed internally to the Vietnamese scene) would offer total forgiveness at the war's conclusion to all members of past regimes, notably that of Diem, who have opposed the Communists but do not now do so. A more advanced version would be to offer open arms at the war's end to all opponents, including high officers of the present regime, leaving only a handful of top-ranking SVN government figures whom the Communists would vow to prosecute. Another step (directed to the outside world including the US as well as to internal SVN) could be a retreat from the position that the NLF must predominate in the South Vietnam of the future, and the increased casting of the NLF as an altruistic agent that, upon ridding the country of the foreigners, will stand aside and not impose its will.

Given our present strategy for the war, and the lack of alternatives, our options for avoiding the above policies possibilities are limited to minimizing the disturbing effects of the building up. In economic aspects,

much thinking and effort has been achieved and the subject will not be discussed here.¹ As for reducing social friction and resentment of Americans, some thinking and effort has been attempted in reducing our urban presence. Such reduction is costly and arduous, but must be considerably more drastic than what has been attempted to date. The process of reduction of already existing American urban presence should be reckoned with as a major (though not necessarily publicized) objective of the US effort, worthy in emphasis, attention and perhaps in magnitude of staffing within the US Mission in Vietnam, of such programs as Chieu Hoi, Refugee Operations, and the totality of psychological warfare and information efforts. It should also be subject to the same Washington scrutiny and pressure for achievement as these programs.

It goes without saying that in future phases of the buildup, a strict effort should be made to prevent personnel concentration, such as headquarters and logistics complexes in urban areas, even though, for reasons of self-defense and of logistics, such an approach may call for an appreciably larger overall US presence than an approach exploiting the advantages of urban areas. In simple terms, it is to our advantage to expend great effort to establish a base 10 miles away from, say, My Tho or Ben Tre, than to make our bases within these towns.

There are additional measures that can be taken with personnel that must necessarily remain within urban areas - along the lines of the current Saigon staggered off-limits system, or the efforts to clean up Qui Nhon by putting much of the town's facilities off limits. There are also a variety of measures toward greater control of US civilian presence, including that of the sizeable civilian contract personnel contingent.

1. More is possible - for example, the controversial step of limiting the amount of spending money transferred to Americans in Vietnam; an attack on unofficial private housing by government employees; the introduction of compounds for contractor personnel.